

The Anglesey Coast - Where land and sea meet

South Stack



Islands are secure places – their boundaries are instantly identifiable, and their people staunchly defensive of their own cultures and traditions. Security is enhanced by the contrast with the surrounding sea.

All things are, of course, relative, and Anglesey is but an island off the British Isles, with in turn smaller islands off its own coastline. However, at some 24 miles across, with nearly 100 miles of coastline, Anglesey is large enough to have a diversity of landscapes, matched by a similar variety of cultures.

This seamless relationship between land, sea and human has created physical and cultural landscapes specific to the coastal environment. The nature of these relationships changes over time, though former cultures are preserved in the collective memory of the present, and can be found in language, in physical and relict remains, in literature, music and art.

Flint tools over 8,000 years old have been found at several locations on the Anglesey coastline, dating from a time when a land crossing to Ireland was still possible, and birch forests dominated. Hunting and gathering wild foods left little mark on the landscape, though fire was a tool that could be used with devastating affect. The introduction of farming some 5,500 years ago was a more dramatic turning point, leading to the first incursions on the deciduous woods that now grew throughout the island. New crops and animal breeds reached the British Isles by boat. The Neolithic burial chamber of Barclodiad y Gawres sited on the west coast of Anglesey is more closely related to the Irish tombs of the Boyne Valley than to those further inland, and the differently styled tomb at Trefignath, near Holyhead, has closer affinities with the west coast of Scotland.

The sea provides a means of communication, yet also acts as a barrier, and it is the latter characteristic that the promontory forts of the later prehistoric

period utilise. The fort at Dinas Gynfor on the north coast of Anglesey is the northernmost point of Wales, though the original inhabitants would have been more interested in its defensive aspects, where banks and ditches cut off the landward approach, and high cliffs make a seaward approach no easier.

A journey through the chronology of coastal Anglesey fails to make clear its nature, nor can it reveal the many inter-relationships between the natural environment and human intercession. We will therefore turn from chronology to space, and attempt a clockwise circumnavigation around the island from Holyhead.

Throughout the journey, it is clear the formative influence is the geology of the island. The cliffs at South Stack, Precambrian in age (laid down between 590 and 700 million years ago) offer a beauty all of their own, showing the results of huge temperatures and pressure deep within the earth's crust. The cliffs and heaths offer nesting sites for a wide variety of sea birds, including puffins and kittiwakes. These



can be watched from the castellated folly built for Ellin Stanley in 1868 and now manned by the RSPB. A climb to the top of Holyhead Mountain, Anglesey's highest peak, reveals that the Romans had been there and built a square lookout station that could communicate incoming danger to the fort below. They built their tower within the confines of a much larger and earlier fort, the massive wall of which snakes around the contours of the mountain summit. Holyhead Mountain rock differs from South Stack, though is of a similar age. Its hard quartzite was extensively quarried for the construction of the Holyhead breakwater that now comes into view. The longest breakwater in the British Isles, it was designed by James Meadows Rendel, and built between 1848 and 1873. Views to the south and west reveal the sandy bays of western Anglesey and Holy Island, including Trearddur, Porth Dafarch, Rhoscolyn and further south to Cymyran

'..the stomach, where bones, wrecks, continents are digested'

R S Thomas

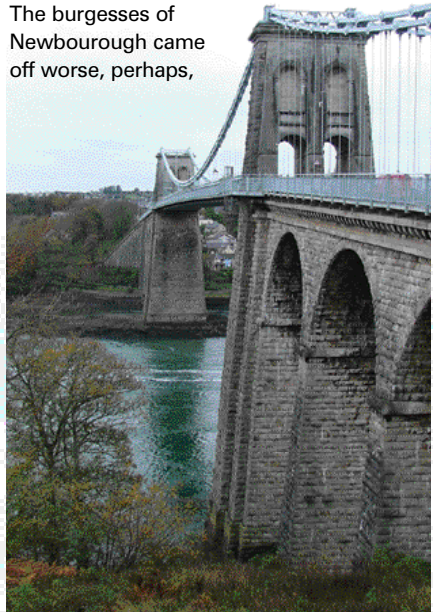
'The Sea' from *Young and Old*, 1972.



Llun/Photo: Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn

and Rhosneigr. Treaddur Bay and Rhosneigr are both interesting developments in the rise of small holiday settlements that took place from the 1890's, where new wealth was responsible for the construction of comfortable holiday homes, and though buildings from the 1960's and 70's now dominate, the underlying pattern of Edwardian houses is still discernible.

Storms in the fourteenth century battered the Anglesey west coast, and drove in huge quantities of sand, creating desert where previously there had been agriculturally productive lands. The burgesses of Newborough came off worse, perhaps,



Llun/Photo: Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn

having only been forced out of their far more productive lands at Llanfaes by Edward I some twenty years previously. Remains of the earlier court belonging to the Welsh Princes can still be seen by the church, excavated from the covering sand.

The sheltered Menai Strait is crossed by the Britannia and Menai bridges, two of the defining monuments of the industrial revolution in North Wales. The stone was produced from the productive limestone quarries of south-east Anglesey, but the expertise was provided by Thomas Telford and Robert Stephenson, two of the greatest civil engineers of the 19th century. The sheltered fields on the productive limestone belt of southern Anglesey became the home of the wealthier gentry, and on both sides of the Strait can be seen parkland belonging to large country houses, including Plas Llanidan, Plas Goch, Plas Llanfair and Plas Newydd, the latter now National Trust owned was (indeed still is) the seat of the Marquis of Anglesey, the present house reflecting the work of James Wyatt and Joseph Potter, though Humphrey Repton was the influence behind the parkland.

The town of Beaumaris at the east end of the Strait is an English design in a Welsh countryside. The castle of Edward I, a World Heritage Site, is beautifully symmetrical, being designed on flat land, with no constraining elements as at Conwy and Caernarfon. The adjoining borough, for long the County town, is a wealth of Georgian town architecture, and has a fine

Shoreline at Beaumaris

seaside pier (built 1846) that preceded the Bangor, Colwyn and Llandudno piers by some fifty years. On round the coast to Penmon, and the limestone quarries, that were responsible for many fine Welsh and English buildings, including the town hall at Birmingham, become clearly visible. At Penmon is the former Augustinian priory, established on the site of an earlier Welsh monastic church. The nave contains some of the finest Romanesque architecture in north Wales.

The east coast of Anglesey, with its wide sweeping bays of Red Wharf, Benllech and Lligwy is now a popular resort and different in character to the west coast, in part because of the dominance of limestone. Until the 19th century there were few nucleated settlements, and the area was characterised by large farms and intermingled smallholdings with cottages of two rooms and a crog-loft. Fishing mingled with farming to provide an income, and Moelfre retains the feeling of a small fishing community. To the north the character changes as the higher plateau of the Ordovician rocks change the vegetation from lime-loving to acidic. In the north-east corner is Parys Mountain, once the largest copper mine in the world, and responsible for sheathing the hulls of ships that defeated Napoleon's navy. Its wealth of archaeology and lunar landscape attract many visitors, and has been the inspiration for numerous artists.

The north coast of Anglesey is wild and

rugged, a reflection again of Precambrian rocks. Harbours exist in secluded inlets wherever shelter is found. The tons of copper ore from Parys Mountain were shipped from Porth Amlwch, a narrow inlet between steep rocks, but widened and deepened in the late 18th and early 19th century to take larger and more ships. Cemaes Bay has a pier to shelter behind, and was the scene of boat building and fishing, as well as exports of marble. It was the site of one of the medieval courts of the Welsh princes, and is an attractive town, though much of the architecture is Victorian and later.

The west coast continues the same rugged appearance. At Porth Swtan the only remaining thatched cottage on Anglesey has been renovated by a local group and is a past recipient of a Rural Wales Award. South towards the narrower strait between Holy Island and Anglesey, the coast is more difficult to access even though the remote aspect and strange beauty of the Alaw estuary makes the effort all the more worthwhile.

We are now back opposite Holyhead, with Telford's 1824 embankment crossing the strait. It is unlikely he foresaw that the tide rushing through the tunnel into the inland sea would form a standing wave that has become the attraction of hundreds of kayakers every year.

Anglesey is an island, shaped by the defining line where land and sea meet. Modern life can isolate itself from much of the former hardships of coastal life, yet sailors still sail and even the roughest of days can find walkers bracing themselves against the wind and rain. It is good to be reminded of these elements, though we are, perhaps, less defined by them than those from former times described by R S Thomas:



Llun/Photo: Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn



*'These are the crusted men
Of the sea, measuring time
By tide-fall, knowing the changeless
Seasons, the lasting honeysuckle
Of the sea. They are lean and hard
And alert, and while our subjects
Increase, burdening us
With their detail, these keep to the one
Fact of the sea, its pitilessness, its beauty.'*

(R S Thomas, 'Islandmen' from *Young and Old*, 1972).

Man cyfarfod y môr a'r tir

Ym Môn, mae'r berthynas ddi-fwlch rhwng tir, môr a phobl wedi creu tirweddau diwylliannol unigryw y mae modd eu holrhain dros filoedd o flynyddoedd.

Mae cysylltiadau clos rhwng rhai henebion yma ag eraill yn lwerddon a'r Alban

ac mae'r môr yn gyswllt a rhwystr amddiffynnol yr un pryd. Bydd taith o amgylch yr ynys hefyd yn dangos pa mor bwysig yw daeareg wrth ffurfio natur y lle.

Daeth stormydd â thywod lle bu tir amaethyddol a daeth ymwelwyr i'r traethau

melyn; cerrig o'r ynys a adeiladodd y ddwy bont drawiadol tros y Fenai a datblygodd stadau mawr ar ddarnau o galchfaen ffrwythlon.

Carreg galch sydd ym Mhenmon hefyd ond mae'n fwy asid ar Fynydd Parys a

fu unwaith yn bwl copr mwya'r byd. Creigiau cyn-Gambraidd sydd wedi creu glannau ysgythrog y gogledd. Ac yna'n ôl i Ynys Cybi heibio i aber Alaw, fel Môn wedi'i ffurfio ar y llinell bendant lle mae tir a môr yn cwrdd.